

Book Review

FLYING FOXES: AUSTRALIAN NIGHT FORESTERS

Vivien Jones. 2013. 192 Pp.

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\$37.00

At first glance at this book one would think, “What an attractive coffee-table book,” but second glance would tell you this is not the case or - more accurately - this is not the whole story. Vivien Jones’ book of outstanding photography of grey-headed flying-foxes (*Pteropus poliocephalus*) presents the biology of an often-maligned species in amazing detail. Jones’ photographs (over 200) clearly illustrate that she has an eye for the beauty, is a skilled photographer and a keen observer of the behaviour of grey-headed flying foxes. These abilities, together with her knowledge of the species’ natural history, have allowed her to produce an unusual and engaging book on the biology of a fascinating native Australian mammal, which is also a threatened species.

Jones stated that her primary goal in creating this book was, “public education, or public relations” regarding flying-foxes. Each photo is accompanied by scientifically accurate but minimal text written in a non-scientific style - using a casual, friendly and conversational tone, often laced with humour. Furthermore, the book visually reveals the intricacies of the life of the grey-headed flying-fox. Many photos are included not because they are ‘pretty pictures’ but because they are biologically informative. When I first perused the book I occasionally thought, “There are far too many pictures on this particular page - it’s cluttered.” Second glance revealed that the series of photographs were providing a behavioural description more effectively and concisely than words could convey. This photographic approach is far more palatable, engaging and memorable to the non-scientist reader and also achieves far more than a single lovely picture could in terms of education and public relations.

Jones’ flying-fox ‘base camp,’ the principal site of her observations and photos, is in Bellingen, NSW. In Chapter 2, grey-headed flying fox morphology, general biology and behaviours are described and, in part, contrasted with those of the black flying fox (*P. alecto*) and the little red flying fox (*P. scapulatus*). Chapter 3 focuses on the life of

the grey-headed flying-fox from birth up to adulthood. I was fascinated by the series of photos documenting flying-fox pup births and the heroic - in my view - acts of the mothers in caring for the young, i.e. flying long distances with a heavy youngster clinging to her breast. Adult behaviours are revealed in Chapter 4, including feeding on pollen and fruit and obtaining a drink of water by ‘dipping’ or ‘skimming’ in rivers or lakes in order to soak their belly fur, which will be licked dry later. Mating behaviours are well documented and described with a touch of humour. Jones also lists a number of points regarding social dynamics, which are largely anecdotal in nature but, nevertheless, are scientifically intriguing and present food-for-thought for future research directions. In Chapter 6, Jones presents a calendar of the activities of grey-headed flying-foxes at Bellingen, NSW, in a simple, conversational style that reveals the yearly cycle of their movements and behaviours. Habitat loss, populations declines of flying-foxes and their critical role as pollinators of native Australian forests are the conservation issues highlighted in Chapter 7, entitled “Point of View.” The book concludes with a set of seven useful and referenced appendices - fully illustrated, of course.

In conclusion, while this book does indeed reside on my coffee table, when a guest picks it up to casually flip through the photographs, they invariably stop and find themselves reading the text before turning to the next page. Thus, I would say that Viv Jones has achieved her goal in producing a book that educates - while potentially improving human-megabat relations with the intriguing and beautiful portraits she presents in this book on a species that plays a critical role in the Australian ecosystem.

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